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ABSTRACT

This presentation is predicated on the belief that local school leaders must become more actively engaged in increasing effectiveness with state legislators. Political activity cannot be left to state educational associations, rather, school administrators must assume a continuous, active role in the political process without becoming partisan. Effective communications with state legislators, based on credibility, content, clarity, and currency in a face-to-face, one-on-one approach, are preferable to written communications. (Author/DW)

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PRESENTATION

Made By

Dr. Fred D. Williams, Executive Secretary
Kentucky Association of School Administrators

at the 1975 AASA Convention
on Sunday, February 23, 1975
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"Working Effectively With State Legislature"

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INTRODUCTION

Education and politics don't mix. The terms "politics" and "politicians" have negative connotations to educators. School leaders should continue to maintain their lofty perch along the high road of political action and let the state education association descend into the valley of legislative action. The first two statements have never been able to withstand close scrutiny by educators who believe as Kimbrough and Nunnery have said, "that the quality of public education in the U.S. is related to the ability of school leaders to influence the political system within which the schools function." The latter statement pertaining to the state education association is very questionable today when we find state administrator associations that were once satellite organizations whirling around the education association planets becoming planets in their own rights.

THE PROBLEM

In the January 1975 issue of the "Iowa Association of School Administrators Newsletter" the following question was raised, "Are you involved politically?" In connection with his graduate studies, a local Iowa superintendent had surveyed the political attitudes and activities of Iowa superintendents. He found that superintendents, both in their own estimation and from the opinions of others, are not politically active enough.

In the January 13, 1975 issue of "Education U.S.A.", a weekly publication of the National School Public Relations Association, there appeared an article entitled "Educational Policy Is Set By Politics, Study Says". In the article, reference was made to a study conducted by Campbell and others at Ohio State University. The premise of the study, State Policy Making for Public Schools: A Comparative Analysis, was that educational policy is born from and thrives on politics. Some conclusions reached in the study were:

1. State boards of education lack policy influence.
2. Chief state school officers are often active in policy-making, but much of their reputation is more perceived than true.

3. Teacher associations are ranked as the most influential at the state level, followed by school boards, administrator groups and teacher federations where they exist.

Is there distrust between educators and politicans? The answer is "Yes" in the opinion of assembly man John Vasconcellos of California. Writing in the May/June 1974 issue of "Compact", a bimonthly publication of the Education Commission of the States, Mr. Vasconcellos raised the following points when he was pleading for something to be done about the distrust between educators and politicians.

1. When educators come before legislative committees, they usually talk about such things as employee rights and benefits, or things like structure and organization; they seldom mention the kids.

2. Today, the general populace and the legislators are more educated than was the case several decades ago. Consequently, both the general populace and the legislators are no longer willing to blindly take the word of the educators.

3. Too often the approach advocated by the educators when they appear in the statehouses is, "Just give us more money and we'll make it okay."

4. The biggest problem between educators and politicans - the gap that must be bridged - is the lack of personal involvement between the two. They don't know one another too well.

5. Legislators are not bascially unfriendly to education.

If the conclusions noted in the two studies that I have referred to as well as the statements made by the California Assemblyman are accurate, then what are we waiting for? The handwriting is on the wall - local school leaders must become more effective in their efforts to develop closer working relationships with legislators. During the next few minutes, I want to share with you some points that might be worthy of your consideration as you attempt to become more effectively involved in the political process.

RELATIONSHIP TO STATE ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The day of the lone wolf in effective legislative work is over. If local school leaders want to become more effective practitioners in the area of influencing legislative bodies, it is imperative that they be organized. Many of you present this afternoon come from states where a

full-time executive secretary is employed to serve your state association of school administrators. If such is the case, it is safe to assume that your association has adopted a legislative package that represents your association's position on various educational issues. Most generally information pertaining to the legislative package is disseminated to the entire association membership.

In numerous cases when the literature containing the association's legislative position on educational matters is received, it is read very hurriedly, put in the trash can with the thought going through the reader's mind that the executive secretary is the chief lobbyist and that he will get the message to all legislators. True, the executive secretary might be the association's chief lobbyist in the halls of the statehouse. However, I can assure you that such an attitude and approach to the memberships' involvement in the legislative process will not suffice. Once you receive a brochure describing the association's legislative package, arrange for a meeting with the candidates for the legislative seat. Discuss the proposals. Be specific. Be prepared to advise the candidates as to the political impact of the legislative proposals on your school district that the candidate will be representing in the state legislature if he's successful in his race.

When the state legislature convenes, it is good practice for the association's executive secretary to keep the membership informed about educational legislation being considered by the legislators. Such alerts should be brief and concise. Again, if the alerts are to be of full benefit, it is mandatory that the members use the materials contained therein as a springboard for a meeting with the legislators when they return to their legislative districts on weekends or over holidays. Go just one more step - let your executive secretary know your legislator's position on the various bills described in the alert.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

As you strive to work more effectively with your legislators, keep in mind that communication is the key or the major building block to successful participation. Your effectiveness on almost every point that you discuss

or explore with your legislator will ultimately be traced to this activity.

In considering this important key or building block, here are some factors that are worthy of note:

1. The best approach is through the verbal context on a one-to-one face-to-face basis with your legislator. If this cannot be arranged, call him on the telephone or arrange for a meeting where a small group will meet with him at his convneience to discuss the issue. If possible, such meetings should be back home in his district or at a time in the state capital when he's not too busy to devote adequate time to the topic.

2. Another approach that could be used to communicate with your legislator is through the written message. This could include wire service or letter. Of these two written forms, wire service is the better method in times of crunch. However, if there is no crunch, a letter may suffice.

The American School Counselor Association has prepared a flyer which deals with letter writing to legislators. It is noted that legislators pay careful attention to their mail. However, most legislators place little weight on form letters with identical wording and petitions. According to the Association, the letter that will have the greatest impact is one that is carefully thought out and yet represents an individual's point of view concerning the legislative matter under consideration. The point of view expressed should have a personal ring to it. Provide information as to how a piece of legislation would affect your particular local school district.

Representative Morris Udall of Arizona prepared a list of "do's and "don'ts" for the prospective correspondents. Some of the more timely ones are presented for your consideration.

1. First of all, address the letter correctly.
2. Identify the bill you're writing about.
3. Write in time to do some good.
4. Your letter has a better chance of greater impact if it's kept reasonably brief.
5. Give your own views. A form letter often gets a form reply.
6. Give specific reasons for your position.
7. If you have specialized knowledge on some issue, by all means write.

8. Be constructive. Don't just say what's wrong with a bill. State what you think is the right way.

9. Don't threaten to campaign or vote against your man if he doesn't do what you want. Such remarks rarely intimidate a conscientious member, and they may generate an adverse reaction. And don't bother calling him names.

10. Don't pretend to have great influence.

In a legislative seminar conducted by Mr. Jim Kirkpatrick of the AASA staff, reference was made to the "C's" of communication. Some of the "C's" were:

1. Credibility. The legislator must have confidence in the sender.

2. Content. The message must have meaning for the legislator.

3. Clarity. KISS. (Keep It Simple, Stupid)

4. Current. Make certain that the issue is still under consideration.

Don't forget the legislator after the matter has been dealt with. Notes of appreciation are always in order. On those occasions where your legislator did not vote "right", a note expressing your regret over not having been able to communicate more clearly in regards to the issue is far better than acrimony.

The American Vocational Association has prepared a list of "Golden Rules" for those who work with public officials. In my opinion the principles espoused in the list have universal applicability to any person who works with legislators as well as other public officials. Some of the principles are:

1. Don't underestimate public officials. With very rare exceptions they will be honest, intelligent, and will want to do the right thing. Your job is to inform them what you think is right.

2. Don't look down on government and politics. They may be faulty, but so is the teaching profession. A disdainful attitude is an expensive luxury these days.

3. Be understanding. Put yourself in the public official's place. Try to understand his problems, his outlook, his aims. Then, you are more likely to persuade him to do the same in understanding yours.

4. Be friendly. Don't contact public officials only when you want their help. Invite them to be guests at meetings. Take pains to keep in touch with them throughout the year - every year.

5. Be reasonable. Recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion. Never indulge in threats or recriminations. They are confessions of weaknesses.

6. Be thoughtful. Commend the right things public officials do. That's the way you like to be treated. Any public official will tell you that he gets dozens of letters asking him to do something, but very few thanking him for what he has done.

7. Don't blame public officials for "failing" to do what you wanted. The failure may be yours if you have not done a good job in preparing, presenting, and following through on your case.

8. Be cooperative. If a public official makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. Don't back away for fear that "it's a deal", or that you're "getting into politics."

9. Be realistic. Remember that controversial legislation and regulation usually result in compromise. It has always been so and it will always be so in a democracy.

10. Be practical. Recognize that each legislator has commitments and that a certain amount of vote-trading goes on in a legislature. So, don't chastise a legislator who normally supports you if he happens to vote against one of your bills. This doesn't necessarily mean he has deserted your whole program. Give him the benefit of the doubt; he will appreciate it and remember that you did.

11. Be a good opponent. Fight issues -- not persons. And be ready with alternatives or solutions as well as with criticisms. This is constructive opposition.

12. Be informed. Never meet with legislators to advocate a position without first studying the facts and the arguments pro and con. The mere fact that you want a legislator to adopt one position or another won't be enough to convince him. Do your homework. And remember that while some votes may be firmly committed, there will be many others that can be swayed on the basis of sound arguments that are properly presented.

13. Learn to evaluate and weigh issues. Many bills which are tossed into the hopper "by request" are never intended to become law. So, don't criticize legislators for the bills which are introduced, and don't call out the army until you're sure a bill is serious.

14. Don't break a promise. This is a cardinal rule. If you tell the legislator you'll do something, stick to the bargain.

15. Don't change horses in the middle of the stream. Never leave a legislator stranded out on a limb by changing your position after he has publicly stated a position that you have urged him to take.

16. Don't participate in discussions about legislators being "bought" or "paid off". You have absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose by engaging in such activity. Furthermore, chances are it will not be true.

COALITIONS

According to Michael D. Usdan who prepared an article for the University Council for Educational Administration on "The Role and Future of State Educational Coalitions", "Coalitions are common in the democratic process. In essence, coalitions are political groupings created to maximize chances for achieving commonly agreed upon goals."

In numerous states, educational coalitions are composed of members from the state association of school administrators, state education association, state school boards association, state congress of parents and teachers and, in certain states, the state department of education. In other states, the coalition includes a plethora of lay organizations as well as all the usual professional groups. Ground rules are most generally established to guide and direct such educational coalitions.

Whereas the type educational coalition heretofore described is more or less a formal structure, oftentimes more informal coalitions are being found. Such informal coalitions usually do not meet regularly but do meet on an ad hoc basis to discuss specific issues such as collective bargaining for public employees. For example, in Kentucky representatives from the Kentucky Association of School Administrators and the Kentucky School Boards Association meet with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Farm Bureau, Municipal League, Associated Industries of Kentucky and other similar lay groups in an effort to defeat collective bargaining proposals. Such new educational/lay group coalitions may come into existence as new and different problems and issues arise.

CONCLUSION

This presentation has been predicated on the belief that local school leaders must become more actively engaged in activities designed to result

in their increased effectiveness with state legislators. Such activities are a must if local school leaders are to influence the legislators to make those decisions conducive to quality school programs.

In the past, too much credence was placed on the axiom that education and politics don't mix. As a consequence, educators have abhored the terms "politics" and "politicians". Now that state associations of school administrators are fast becoming educational planets in their own rights and not satellites of state education associations it behooves each of us to realize that we can ill afford to leave the legislative actions to such associations. We must become active participants.

As we become more actively engaged in legislative matters, it behooves each of us to realize that we cannot act as lone wolves and expect to get the job done. Furthermore, we must realize that if we are going to become actively engaged in the political process, it means continuous participation and not a role assumed just at election time or when a burning issue is before the state legislators.

At no time have I advocated that you should become involved in partisan politics as you attempt to enhance your effectiveness with state legislators. However, I might add that I do not feel as adamant about this position as I did just a few years ago.

As you work to establish an effective communications network with your legislators, keep in mind the 4 C's: credibility, content, clarity and current. Moreover, the face-to-face, one-on-one approach is better than the written letter or telegram even though the latter forms will suffice in certain instances. Remember that it has been said, "It's the sizzle that sells the steak, not the cow."